



## FEMINIST AUTOETHNOGRAPHIES DURING COVID-19: RELEVANCE, IMPORTANCE AND IMPACT

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### ABSTRACT

The paper makes an attempt to highlight the relevance and significance of feminist autoethnographical stories and experiences in the wake of Covid-19 crises. The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lock-downs created prolonged stressful situations for women wherein they were compelled to discharge their professional duties within the confines of homes, home-school their children and juggle responsibilities of caring for family members besides other household chores without the traditional support of schools, colleges, crèches and household help. The prolonged challenges of social isolation and a break in social support structures laid immense pressure on the women's physical and mental well-being, resulted in psychosomatic disorders. The author understands that autoethnography is an empowering tool that allows the victim to look at their experiences with the benefit of hindsight and narrate "anecdotal and personal experiences" in her own voice for a better assessment of her well-being as well as to help health professionals get a better understanding of the trauma women may have suffered on account of difficult life circumstances. The noting of her own experiences also helps the victim share her "autobiographical story" which when combined with many other autoethnographic accounts can assume wider cultural, political and social connotations and meanings. As a qualitative research methodology, autoethnographic narratives are used by health professionals to analyse the health of their patient and devise solutions for the individual, and often a large number of people in terms of evidence of new trends and phenomena in society.

**KEYWORDS:** Aesthetics, Reflexivity, Health Care Research, Auto-ethnography, Medical/Health Narrative, and Auto-Ethnographic Writings.

### INTRODUCTION

Autoethnography studies analyse self-reflective experiences and writings documented around health and illnesses, and where "the focus of study is not the group, but the individual". It revolves around individual's 'hidden experiences' to correlate and "provide a unique perspective on a group that can be understood by insiders and outsiders alike" (Richards: 2019:221). Adams, Jones, and Ellis in their work *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*, describe autoethnography as a qualitative research method that harnesses a researcher's personal experiences to analyse and critique 'cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences'.

In other words, auto-ethnography studies collect information about individuals who reflect on their experiences and make a note of their responses and reactions to the stimuli in their outside environment which may be undocumented and unique. Autoethnography studies uses techniques of autobiography, ethnography and research writing "to create new ways of understanding individual experiences as reflective of group identity through uncovering hidden information". Autoethnography is also used by healthcare professionals to understand their patients as well as "to share what the patients have been through [individual patient], to lend insight into caring for people with medical conditions, and to serve as a means of educating others" (Richards 2019:222). Hence, autoethnography is one of the standard procedures in many health-related fields to observe and assess the condition of their patients as well as those who are recipients of healthcare. This way, it makes space for people "to contribute insights about their daily experiences and struggles within systems that have staid and clinical (almost dehumanizing) processes which require people to put aside their own vulnerability". (Richards 2019:223)

According to Carolyn Ellis and et al (2011) autoethnography is both a "process and product". As a process, an author 'retroactively and selectively' writes about his/her past experiences which usually don't become the tool of 're-living these experiences for the author but solely to make them part of a published document; these experiences are assembled using hindsight and an author can interview others related to the case study as well as consult other textual and visual cues like photographs, journals and recordings to help them recall their 'epiphany moment' -which seems to have significantly impacted the trajectory of their life. It is the existential crises that force a person to attend to and analyse lived in experiences and events after which life doesn't seem quite the same. This way, autoethnography involve a self-reflective record of relational practices, common values and beliefs and shared experiences for the purpose of helping insiders and outsiders (Carolyn Ellis 2011:275).

As a product, researchers of auto-ethnography produce descriptions of a group of people or culture i.e common feelings, their stories and happenings- as evidenced by the researcher's field work and interactions with people which are aesthetically provocative in both personal and interpersonal experiences. This further produces texts which becomes accessible to wider and more diverse masses, breaking away from traditional research formats to bring about change for many people (Carolyn Ellis 2011:277)

Hence, the purpose and practice of autoethnography is to use personal experiences to describe and interpret cultural texts, experiences and beliefs to produce "autoethnographic work of communication". It is used by researchers across disciplines such as psychology, media studies, women studies, cultural

studies and geography among others, making sense of autoethnographically produced personal stories and experiences which researchers may find challenging to produce by following standard procedures; autoethnography uses both subjective and objective insights and records it via the tools of writing journals, video and audio diaries and other account keeping records. This way, autoethnography is considered to be a useful research method in the field of health to uncover hidden emotions and feelings of an individual. Richards states:

*"This research can help people who live with similar circumstances to understand their lives better by developing a greater balance between subjective and objective insights into their lives. Researchers use this method to explore vulnerabilities, enhance self-awareness and challenge power abuses" (Richards 2019:231).*

Feminist autoethnography is an offshoot of the same research method that gives insight into the cultural and social experiences of women at times of great vulnerabilities. Covid-19 pandemic is one such period that challenges not only the social and cultural adaptation skills of women, but also their mental and emotional health on account of the financial as well as health risk to their families, especially young children. The in-depth analyses and engaging approach of autoethnography opens the discourses and spaces for women who are currently feeling most vulnerable and unable to talk about their private experiences and emotions on account of social isolation as well as individual sense of stigma or shame. This along with the pressure to cope with home and outside world realities makes the period during Covid-19 epidemic the most challenging. Feminist autoethnography is an effective tool which allows women to better understand their emotions and experiences by adopting self-reflection writing. It also allows them to share their experiences with research institutions who may want to document such records so that it can aid others who are going through similar such circumstances. The tools of reflective thinking and documenting of individuals thoughts via a journal also helps remove the awkwardness they may feel in recounting their experiences to health professionals as well as researchers. The hind sight recording of events also help them in better addressing of their issues of self-identity.

According to Ellis and Bochner, self-reflective documentation in first person account enables the researchers to gaze into "wide-angle lens" where they can go back and forth analysing the social and cultural aspects of individual experiences (Ellis and Bochner 2000:739). The exposing of the vulnerable self in personal narratives helps the individual understand some aspect of her personality as her inner life responds to spontaneously unfolding circumstances in the outer world. In this way, what are deeply personal accounts, become relevant to other participants or the researchers, as they gaze into the collective records for a cogent understanding of events that influenced the inner life of the person documenting it. The highly revelatory self accounts allow readers an access deep into the author's inner world where they can reflect on her experiences, make sense of it and adopt what they can to better cope with their lives (Carolyn Ellis et al., 2011: 275). The reflective autoethnographical practice of self narration to seek an insight into self as well as make sense of the outer world circumstances is of interest to the researcher as a socially relevant discipline that acknowledges the lived in realities of the author in her own voice.

By letting the writers expose their vulnerability in the safe environment of hindsight, autoethnography allows women to rationalise their fears and lived in experiences. Author Brydie is

one such example. She found that drawing on her helplessness as part of autoethnography exercise helped her put to rest a troublesome phase that was strangulating her with its "darkness, dissonance and angst" (Brydie Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis 2009:1). Brydie adds:

*"Autoethnography challenged me to find the cadence point, to breathe, and to listen to the reverberations of my pain and sadness. Autoethnography helped me to hear the beauty and vulnerability in that phrase and understand the reasons for its dark timbre, competing melodies, and restless pulse." (Brydie Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis 2009:1)*

Another auto-ethnographer Carolyn, who is also a musician, bonded with Brydie by saying "autoethnography saved me too". Carolyn explained it in this way:

*"Personal writing saved me from being less than passionately involved in my career and from being so mired in grief that I couldn't breathe. Doing autoethnography made me feel that my work was worthwhile, that I could contribute to making the world a better place, show my students alternative ways to survive grief and reframe their lives, and equip myself to make sense of the life I was living." (Brydie Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis 2009:1)*

The fact that personal journeys and periods of struggle can be analysed for a better understanding of self and for self-healing is testified by Brydie and Carolyn who in their grief diaries "grappled with and moved through joys and challenges to come to new understandings of themselves as musicians and ultimately as human beings" (Brydie Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis 2009:14). The self-reflective writing also helped them align their true self beyond the prism of normative gender and sexual identities (Brydie Leigh Bartleet and Carolyn Ellis 2009:17).

According to Elizabeth Etorre, feminist autoethnography operates at four levels. At the first level are transitional intermediate spaces which lie at the crossroads of embodied emotions while at the second stage is a deeply political sense of identity. At the third level are feminist minded critical writings, which are performed to influence the future of women; the fourth stage aids in raising the contradictory consciousness by exposing precariousness of life and life circumstances (Ettore 2017:17-18).

Thus, feminist autoethnography makes valuable contributions to different disciplines as:

*"a method of being, knowing and doing that combines two concerns telling the stories of those who are marginalized and making good use of our own experiences. No longer must we insist on being dispassionate or positioned outside the hermeneutic circle in order to make valid contributions to knowledge" (Allen and Piercy 2005: 156).*

The procedure of narrative writing puts women in more mature circumstances where they can benefit from self-reflection on a situation in past and posit their lived in experiences against the benchmarks of a heteronormative patriarchal society which controls women by setting up social expectations that determine how they act and live by. Living through Covid-19 epidemic is a testing period that challenges the conventional norms while at the same time expecting women to adhere by a culture that precedes the corona virus phenomenon.

## Feminist Autoethnography narrative/writing during Covid-19

The phenomenon of Covid-19 left women all the more vulnerable at the socio-economic and cultural level. Women struggled with the trauma of loneliness and multi-level risks to self and the family members during an unprecedented period of extensive social lockdowns in human history. Even as the socio-economic hardships surround them, they have to cope with immense pressures of discharging their professional duties while juggling childcare and household responsibilities without the assistance of traditional social support infrastructure on account of closed schools, crèches and prohibited visits to friends and extended family. The work from home phenomenon has also unwittingly added to the chaos wherein boundaries have blurred and they constantly have to switch on and off the office work to manage young children and other household chaos. This has pushed the stress levels to all time high as the gender expectations have not changed in households and women are still doing most of the household work (Guy and Arthur 2020:888). This brings to fore misogyny wherein men seem to have embraced the idea of gender equality, yet when it comes to household work, traditional values dominate (Donner 2020).

In fact, studies show little change in traditionally held views and a greater gender disparity is at display even at work wherein women are expected to work at par with their male colleagues yet bring home lower pay and promotion opportunities. This along with the escalation of socio-cultural violence that women are exposed to at home in the form of domestic abuse they experience while living in with their perpetrator for the most part of the day, have pushed women health issues to new crisis levels today.

In their social identities of mothers, daughters, sisters and unequal professionals, women are constantly exposed to mundane yet insidious challenges that threaten their physical, mental and emotional well-being. The autoethnographic accounts of women during Covid-19 will bring into context the worsening socio-cultural realities and provoke a thought process to challenge the gender inequality besides creating a stimulus for bringing social conditions more in sync with compulsions of Covid-19 pandemic.

In an article published in New York Times 2020, Jessica Bennet reports on various women playing different roles during covid-19 and how stressful it was to cope while being confined at home. An autoethnographer Sarah Joyce Willy, who worked as a chief client officer for a health service company in Sharon, Massachusetts, and worked from home during pandemic where she is closeted in with her two young boys and a husband, writes:

*"I feel like I have five jobs: mom, teacher, C.C.O., house cleaner, chef. My kids also call me 'Principal mommy' and the 'lunch lady.' It's exhausting."* (Bennet 2020)

Similarly, an article titled "Academic motherhood during COVID-19: Navigating our dual roles as educators and mothers" shows how working mothers defined new meaning to their roles as mothers and faculty. In the dialogue between Brittiany (an associate professor at the University of Cincinnati) and Sheva (researcher and educator at University of Cincinnati) - two working women during the Covid-19 lockdown states - Sheva says:

*"I am doing the best I can, as well, to give myself grace as I embrace all these new roles that I have taken on. I am now a mother, an elementary school teacher, a wife, a college*

*professor, a homemaker, a program manager, a chef, a writer, and a doctor, ALL AT THE SAME TIME. Sorry — my daughter is wailing in the background as I type this sentence. Even when my husband is home, as much as we try to be equal partners, my kids want their mommy. My daughter gets fussy when I am upstairs doing work and my husband frequently has to bring her to me to calm her down or to feed her. When the boys are doing their schoolwork, it's mommy this and mommy that 24/7. I can't catch a break in either my work or home life and due to the lockdown there is no real escape from either. We are ALL together ALL the time! I have come up with some techniques to mitigate the issues that arise while working from home (while also home schooling children and taking care of a household and infant)":* (Guy and Arthur 2020: 893)

Further, coping with the new phenomenon of forced lockdowns which has brought along with it increased workload, social isolation and suspension of previous social support infrastructure,

Sheva makes her point;

*"It is no secret that we, as a human race, are experiencing a collective trauma. I have engaged in several ways to promote my own self-care as well as maintain connection with others while social distancing".* (Guy and Arthur 2020: 896)

To which Brittiany replies:

*"Although this time of being remote has been tough, it has challenged me to reflect more deeply than ever before. During the months I've spent cooped up at home, playing with my son, I've tried to create my own happiness. Recognizing that connection with others is such an important aspect of my life, I've had to find unique ways to feel this connection. Taking the time to video chat with family members who live in other states regularly, calling friends while I take my daily walks (talking to them on the phone while I walk is almost like they are walking with me), virtual trivia nights, and ensuring I have alone time. I think it is important that through all of this we remember, it is okay to ask for what you need. I need time to be by myself, time to decompress and to not be a mom or a professional — time to just exist as Brittiany".* (Guy and Arthur 2020: 896)

The autoethnographic account of Priyanka and Shreya, published by Wiley Online Library titled Lockdown and Me...!! Reflections of working women during the lockdown in Vadodara, Gujarat-Western India, revealed how women feel mentally and physically fatigued while juggling multiple roles during Lockdown-19. In contrast, Priyanka and Shreya are mentally and physically fatigued but have no other choice but to continue to multitask during the pandemic.

Priyanka (26), a finance executive who got married 2 years ago, analyses:

*"Lockdown made it difficult since this was our first experience of work from home. At times I was lost and wondering what to do and how to manage everything at one go. But somehow, I have survived, and now everybody is getting used to this new working style. I am tired and feeling unwell, and I continue wondering about where this all heading. I fear about visiting the doctor during the pandemic".* (Venkataraman and Venkataraman 2020: 6)

Shreya (31), an HR manager in a large engineering services firm, notes with a tone of regret:



*"Being a corporate professional and a wife is hard and exhausting. More time is taken away by work demands leading to lesser time at home. I feel guilty, but I keep telling myself that I cannot be everywhere at the same time, so depending on where I am at any given time, I need to give my 100%."* (Venkataraman and Venkataraman 2020:6)

The discussions quoted conversations show how the stress of constant physical, mental and emotional demands on individuals as they multitask and juggle from professional work to household chores and childcare responsibilities and back forth, impacted the lives of women. They also show the perception of the respondents about their spouses' contribution to housework. This confirms the patriarchal functioning of the society where women's roles are viewed as performative. Judith Butler states "the gender identity is created through sustained social performances" and "performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all" (Butler 1988:528).

Female gender performativity is accentuated and reinforced into society through sustained performance of societal roles and assurances that perpetuate gender identity. The notings of autoethnographers above reveal how vulnerable were women during the coronavirus pandemic. However, one must distinguish the definition of gender roles and expectations from women in different societies; Venkataram and Venkataraman note that in the western societies, women are "more autonomous in their attitudinal orientation" whereas in India or even in Asia, "women function within a complex family web where she manages her household work and career so that reputation of the family is not at stake" (Venkataram and Venkataraman 2020: 3).

The feminist autoethnography thus projects and challenges the established social practices by sharing insights from personal experiences which are captured into cogent notings under the guidance of established facts and rational thought processes. Its other objective is to help and guide other people undergoing similar circumstances. The process of autoethnography can be deeply personal and poignant yet at the same time comprehensible under the theoretical discourses (Smailes 2014: 56). Thus, autoethnography is a socially empowering tool that gives a platform to unseen faces and creates space for people to share and relate to.

The corona virus outbreak may have been devastating for all, but its heaviest burden has been put on women who toiled long hours without the traditional social structural support. However, for all its challenges, Covid-19 pandemic empowered women to create a new tool to share their authentic experiences that reveal their vulnerability and strength at the same time. The pandemic has also compelled them to reassess their values, keep what is essentially relevant to them and discard the inessentials.

The challenging circumstances have compelled people to reflect deeply on their essential identities and cherish what is most dear to them (Guy and Brittainy 2020: 897). Still, the pandemic unleashed new social realities by challenging the conventional norms of public life and brought forth new challenges for men and women to adapt to. Further, new solutions have to be found to address the socio-cultural and economic inequalities for women in the Post-Covid 19 world.

## CONCLUSION

The feminist autoethnography draws on the tradition of telling the truth in settings that challenge the conventional form of autoethnography. The qualitative tools helps the women, who

are both a victim and an author, reflect on their experiences to make a sense of the changes in their being. It is an affirmative tool that empowers them to take initiatives for self healing by analysing the circumstantial triggers that set in motion complex psycho-physiological processes in their being. The pandemic of Covid-19 unleashed a whole new array of challenges besides deepening the existing social inequalities for women. The feminist autoethnography helped many unheard voices navigate the new socio-economic challenges by giving them a platform wherein they can interact, read and learn from the self-accounts of other women who went through the same experiences as them. This also empowered them by bringing in hope and showed a new ways to deal with the trauma of lived in experiences.

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